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## Interview with Liliane Louvel

Anna Kérchy and Catriona McAra

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**Anna Kérchy and Catriona McAra:** As Karen Jacobs points out in her introduction to your *Poetics of the Iconotext* (2011), your analytical take is worthy of the attention of scholars of illuminated medieval manuscripts and hypertext enhanced digital e-books alike. Yours is certainly a kaleidoscopic methodology that fuses insights from art criticism with those of phenomenological philosophy, the psychology of perception and the physiology of vision to explain the reading/viewing experience in terms of Greco-Roman myths of representation that are applicable to both old and new literary and visual media. Yet are there any major differences in the iconotextual poetics of old and new media?

**Liliane Louvel:** I think new virtual digitally produced documents or screen shots will have a strong influence on people and as a consequence on literary works, as people will become used to looking at screens on which a poly/intermedial 'spectacle' will increasingly be presented to them. 'Ekphrasis in Our Digital Age' was the subject of a workshop in Berlin. And under the aegis of Renate Brosch (University of Stuttgart), we are preparing a special issue for *Poetics Today* which will be dedicated to this subject. In the special issue I try to define types of ekphrasis and see to what extent iconotextual poetics has to adapt to new media, although the main features of the former theory are still valid.

Inter/polymediality and using non-physically present documents, i.e. a compound of text and image, is now at everyone's fingertips. This is in addition to its being used to create swiftly changing images that are even synchronised with sound, music, which makes inter-medial productions out of them. Likewise, in the phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty) of reader/spectator's response, perception remains crucial to analysing new types of visually oriented works. I also think that cognition and the new paths it offers may come in handy to explain the brains and the impact of IT-oriented works and the IT era.

**Anna Kérchy and Catriona McAra:** Your theoretical argumentation willingly embraces metaphors that are connected to female embodiment. These include 'the pregnant moment', 'the maternal model of metapictoriality', 'the maternal mode of generating images'. Can you expand on the place of the (represented/representing) body throughout the iconotextual interpretation process? Could corporeal narratology and text/image theory mutually complement one another's methodological apparatuses?

**Liliane Louvel:** I do think that the role of the body has been ignored too much by literary poetics at large. The dynamics of reading must take into account the reader's response: the reader has to be attentive to her *[sic]* own reaction while reading/seeing a literary text in her mind, what I call the 'pictorial third' in my latest book *Le tiers pictural* (PUR, 2010) and

develop at large there. [This volume has just been translated by Angeliki Tseti as *The Pictorial Third* and submitted for publication.] I do think that corporeal narratology is essential in text/image theory and is part of the apparatus. The notion of apparatuses has been developed strongly in Toulouse by French scholars, and in particular by Philippe Ortel, working on the basis of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. Bernard Vouilloux was also invited to share in this series of conferences.

The 'pictorial third' is the emergence on the reader/voyeur's inner screen of an image. This is neither the one contrived by the narrator nor the one the reader holds in book form in his or her hand but an image developed out of the ekphrasis that hovers in between the two other images. I construct this idea on the basis of Jacques Derrida's concept of the 'third book', which he elaborated on when writing about Edmond Jabès in *L'écriture et la différence*. It is also the result of what Louis Marin identifies as *un événement de lecture*, a 'reading event': when reading some manuscripts of Stendhal's, he came across sketches that the author had drawn on the handwritten pages. They came as a shock to him and stopped him in his reading tracks. They then lingered on in his mind's eye, as a visual memory of the reading event/advent. Marin recognised that the event his body had alerted him to was significant, and constructed a theoretical tool on the basis of it. Jeanette Winterson also evoked the call launched by art in her essay on art objects. She plays on the grammatical possibilities offered by the word 'object' in her 'when art objects', meaning that art calls for our attention by means of our body's stirrings which then alert us to art when it 'objects'.

**Anna Kérchy and Catriona McAra:** In your analytical dialogues with experimental writers like Virginia Woolf you systematically explore pictorial descriptions that are at the heart of the novelistic narrative as symptomatic manifestations of the way language is intricately intertwined with its visual discontents at an intermedial crossroad that elicits 'ineffable pleasure'. How much has your 'iconotextual poetics' been informed by the feminist agenda to destabilise established boundaries and binaries? How does your work relate to feminist iconographers like Wendy Steiner who emphatically situate text/image relationships within the context of the hegemonic domination that is perpetuated by the sacrificial rhetoric of patriarchy, colonialism, imperialism and their efforts to maintaining cultural domination? Is there a political potential to the 'ineffable pleasure' emerging from our recognition of the 'pluriform, oxymoronic fusion' of verbal and visual registers? In *The Poetics of the Iconotext* you write about the ethical function of images as well as 'the pictorial as the return of the repressed of the poetic text', and call ekphrasis a gendered concept. Could you elaborate on these ideas, and would it be perhaps possible to relate them to each other?

**Liliane Louvel:** Yes, this is exactly what I argued in the first chapter of *Le tiers pictural*. I insisted on the hegemony and what has been called by some critics the patriarchal domination and the imperialism of language over image. I see this former paragonal or agonistic view of the word/image relationship as an age-old inheritance and a perspective that frames the relationship in agonistic terms, whereas my vision is much more irenic. I see the word/image relationship in terms of a transaction, or better, a dialogue between the two media. David Kennedy evokes an ekphrastic encounter in his book (2012), and Stephen Cheeke writes about *Writing for Art* (2008). I also stress the fact that language and image have long been envisaged in gendered terms. Lessing, for instance, suggested that language is more on the virile side, whereas image is much more supple (even treacherous) and feminine. The Burkean dichotomy between the sublime and the beautiful still has its followers.

**Anna Kérchy and Catriona McAra:** In his 1980 collection *The Language of Images*, W. J. T. Mitchell greeted the emerging collaboration between ‘practitioners of the words’ (literary critics) and practitioners of the image (art historians) that facilitated ‘the no man’s land between the realms of word and image’ as a research field on its own right. In their editorial introduction to *Picturing the Language of Images* (2013), Nancy Pedri and Laurence Petit, more than three decades later, acknowledge the mediating role of critics like Mitchell, Mieke Bal or yourself in increasingly intense collaborations between image and word scholars as well as in the development of ‘text and image’ studies into a well-established discipline within the humanities. How do you see the evolution of text/image theory? What are the most fruitful current areas of investigation? Has a genuine dialogue been established between the English- and the French-speaking communities of text/image specialists? Are there any dangers of this fundamentally vanguardist, nomadic and dynamic research field (interdisciplinary applied iconology) becoming fossilised/homogenised concomitant with its institutional canonisation?

**Liliane Louvel:** I do think word/image theory and studies still have a lot to offer. There is now ISIS, the International Society for Intermedial Studies. In France SAIT, Society for the Study of Arts, Images and Texts in the English-Speaking World, is another society that is devoted to intermedial studies, which shows that sister associations keep developing and prospering. The success of the triennial IAWIS/IAERTI (International Association of Word and Image Studies) conferences and the number of workshops held during various European association conferences, ESSE [European Society for the Study of English] conferences, as well as the success of this area of studies in North America (Canada and the USA) demonstrate word/image studies’ vitality. Books and journals keep on being published in traditional printed or online format (see *textimage*, edited by Olivier Leplatre). French-speaking communities in France but also in Canada (in the research projects of Bertrand Gervais in Montreal, and Julie Leblanc in Toronto), in Portugal (at the Institute of Comparative Literature in Porto in the work of Rui Carvalho Homem and Rosa Martelo) and other French-speaking countries testify to the will to open dialogues between the two scholarly communities.

I think that word/image theory will have to take into account what was the subject of your first question that is the quickly changing modalities of the visible, the impact of the new forms of Information Technology but also the works of contemporary artists who often resort to many types of dialogue between word and image; conceptual art often has to resort to long explanations. (See the path-breaking work of ‘Art and Language’ in Britain during the seventies.) This is also the inheritance of Duchamp’s ‘nominalism’, when he threw out to the public that the gesture constituted the work of art. Everyone then had to explain the gesture and the artist’s standpoint. Language took over the role of the image, and once more the latter had to recede into the background. See the impact of explanatory plaques in art galleries, where people spend more time deciphering them than properly looking at the images. Even paintings by the Old Masters...

I don’t think a fossilisation of this nomadic research will occur, for it is *both* dynamic *and* nomadic. For instance, we are beginning to see the emergence of the description of installations and performances in literary works that has replaced an earlier taste for the tamer pictures of the Italian Renaissance, Dutch masters and the Impressionists. This opens up new ways of writing ekphrasis and creative ways of rethinking the relationship between evolving art (moving, changing, not fixed), such as in Siri Hustvedt’s work, when the narrator describes boxes, conceptual art and performances. Reminiscent of Bill Viola’s videos, perhaps, Will Self

has also staged and described an apparatus that is constituted by six screens showing a video in his *Dorian*. Montage is a wonderful technique used by Barbara Hodgson in *The Sensualist* where she integrated pictures of anatomy, boxes, books and Vesalius woodcuts in her book. Once it has liberated itself from the canonical ekphrastic habits and dared to mix all kinds of objects in complex apparatuses, the inventory of possibilities offered by word and image is amazing and full of vitality.

**Anna Kérchy and Catriona McAra:** In *Le tiers pictural* you introduce the concept of the 'pictorial third' to avoid the pitfalls of dualistic thinking. You describe an intimate negotiation of sense, a 'moment of in-betweenness when the text stretches towards the image and the image takes flight towards the text, and in the mind of the re-cognisant reader the text trembles, vibrating a visual syncope as a counterpoint to the fugue of the text' (translation by A. K.). Was the use of a remarkably poetic style to formulate an important theoretical point here a strategic choice on your part? How do you relate to French post-structuralist feminists such as Kristeva's or Cixous' attempts to reinvent symbolical language in search of an *écriture/vision féminine* that is motivated by transverbal psychic energies of the semiotic realm? Your writing abounds with neologisms, like 'voyure' – a portmanteau combining contemplative *la lecture* (reading) and rebellious *la vision* (seeing). Do you consider language games (e.g. visual puns) important instruments in iconotextual investigations? The motto you chose for *Le tiers pictural* is a line from Bernard Noël: 'Art is the outside where the inside exiles to make itself visible as a return with no return.' Can you explain what this bon mot means for you?

**Liliane Louvel:** I think the French have a very special relationship to language. We have seen over the years how Barthes became ever more 'poetic' while writing, going as far as to write *Fragments du discours amoureux*, which is often considered to be a novel. Hélène Cixous (who taught us *Moll Flanders* during our university studies, by the way) is also an apt representative of someone who performs this French style of writing. It often verges on the creative, because we as writers pay attention to words, and words often lead to/contain further ideas. Of course, Derrida took this possibility to an extreme when his deconstructive method led to words being so deconstructed words that they became almost unintelligible or turned into a system which was not very productive. But still he was so path-breaking in his fruitful manner of writing-as-thinking and thinking-as-writing that a lot of French scholars employ his method in often more subdued and perhaps less inspired ways.

Once more, I do think that we have to pay more attention to our bodies and our... unconscious, is that the right word? When a word demands our attention, or even when one word comes out of our pen or keyboard rather than another. I used the term 'voyure' because I had no other word to pinpoint what I wanted to say; this is that we are standing in a hybridic sort of position when we read the description of an image, that of a particular work of art. We are then both a reader and a seer or voyeur.

I think language 'games' are indeed important for they are the very stuff our thoughts are made of. I would not call them 'games', because this makes them sound too light but linguistic poetic resources that we have to tap into.

As for Bernard Noël, his work is very well suited to demonstrating what I try to do methodologically as he is both a poet and a literary thinker/critic. In the poetic sentence I chose from *Les yeux dans la couleur* (Eyes in Colour), he expresses what I was trying to do. This is to say that 'the pictorial third' is very much inside us, being a very private phenomenon for the poet, too, who makes it visible by giving it a shape for the reader to experience her own

'pictorial third' with, thus returning the image to the outside where it first belonged without being able to return it to the inside, for once this has been experienced it has already changed. I hope this is comprehensible.

### Notes on contributor

- 5 **Liliane Louvel** is Emeritus Professor of British Literature at the University of Poitiers and specialises in contemporary British literature and word/image relationships. She has written numerous articles on the subject and she has also edited several collections of essays. With Leena Leilitta and Sabine Kim, she edited *Intermedial Arts: Disrupting Remembering and Transforming Media* (Cambridge Scholars, 2012), and with Laurence Petit and Karen Brown, she edited *Musing in the Museum, a special issue of Word & Image* (2014). She has published five books on the relationship between word and image: *L'œil du texte* (Toulouse PUM, 1998), *The Picture of Dorian Gray, Le double miroir de l'art* (Ellipses, 2000), *Texte/ image, images à lire et textes à voir* (PUR, 2002), *Le tiers pictural* (PUR, 2010) and *Poetics of the Iconotext*, translated by Laurence Petit and edited by Karen Jacobs (Ashgate, 2011). *Le tiers pictural* has just been translated by Angeliki Tseti and will be published next year by Routledge. Liliane Louvel is the president of ESSE and IAWIS/IAERTI, and has been made Chevalier dans l'ordre de la Légion d'Honneur (2011). E-mail: [liliane.louvel@wanadoo.fr](mailto:liliane.louvel@wanadoo.fr)
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